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ABSTRACT

A content analysis was made of the advertisements broadcast during a half-hour of prime-time television, in an effort to discern the overt (obvious) and covert (underlying) themes present in television advertising. The analysis revealed an overt theme of a world view of individual determination, initiative, self-confidence and self-reliance, and gratification. The covert or unobtrusive theme presents a world view of external determination in which standards are established, consumption is encouraged, and the status quo is accepted and maintained. These two themes appeared to be at odds with each other. One interpretation for this divergence is the gap between the middle-class ideology and the level of consumers in relation to that ideology. A second interpretation is that both themes are attempts to persuade, one as propaganda of agitation and the other as propaganda of integration. Still a third interpretation suggests that advertising be viewed as ritual rather than as persuasion, and as such, the overt theme is of symbolic action while the covert theme is of ritual action. Each of these interpretations suggests that television advertising is not so much a hidden persuader of culture as it is a reflection of culture. (HTH)

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CULTURE WRIT ELECTRONIC:

THEMES IN TELEVISION ADVERTISING

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CULTURE WRIT ELECTRONIC:

THEMES IN TELEVISION ADVERTISING

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I. Advertising Research: Administrative and Critical

Much has been made of advertising's "influence" on public life. Samuel Johnson first suggested that advertisers "play too wantonly with our passions."[1] More recent inquiries, such as those on the subliminal seduction of advertising, do little more than rephrase and update this contention.[2]

Scholarly study of advertising, attempting to provide a more systematic, less impressionistic analysis of the question of "influence," has only recently flourished. An index of journals in communication through 1974 lists over half of all studies on advertising being published since 1970.[3] The two major journals in advertising, Journal of Advertising and the Journal of Advertising Research, were begun only ten and twenty years ago, respectively. And finally, recent bibliographies of advertising research suggest that almost three-fourths of all studies on advertising were published in the 1970's.[4]

These recent studies of advertising fall into three groups--those which study advertising as an institution, such as reports on how outside developments (e.g. product liabilities) influence the operation and transmission of advertising messages;[5] those which study advertising messages, such as inquiries which determine what constitutes a deceptive advertisement for children;[6] and those which study the reception of advertising messages, such as investigations of audience preferences in editorial and program content by heavy media users.[7]

In each of these categories, the underlying idea is that advertising is a tool, albeit of marketing, used for particular purposes and that advertising

research attempts to make advertising better understood and used, as a tool. Such an approach is identical with the approach taken in much of mass communication research, be it in advertising, entertainment or journalism. And as Paul Lazarsfeld initially, and Michael Real more recently suggested, such research is administrative in nature.[8]

As they noted, administrative research is "carried through in the service of some kind of administrative agency of public or private character."[9] Usually such research is intent on addressing and solving particular problems. The end result of adminstrative research is usually a refinement in strategy or method. By and large, the bulk of advertising research adds to one's understanding of the effectiveness of an advertisement and thus serves the advertising industry an agency of private character.

In contrast to administrative research, Lazarsfeld posited the idea of critical research. According to his thinking, critical research requires that, in addition to whatever specific purpose is to be served by a study, the general role of communication in the present social system should also be studied. Thus, critical research is different from administrative research in that "it develops a theory of the prevailing social trends of our times . . . and it seems to imply ideas of basic human values."[10]

It was the critical theory of the Frankfurt School which informed much of Lazarsfeld's thinking about critical research. While based on psychoanalysis and aesthetics, more recent refinements and advances in critical research have involved sociology and political economy. Other influences on critical research have come from anthropology and philosophy.[11]

In differing from administrative research, critical research not only evaluates the role of communication in society, it may also suggest in a critical fashion what changes may be needed to reshape mass communication for the

betterment of the individual and society. Such an objective, within the thinking of Lazarsfeld, does not negate nor diminish the ongoing study of mass communication. Rather, he suggested that "if it were included in the general stream of communication research, it could contribute much in terms of challenging problems and new concepts."[12]

In the area of advertising research this is particularly true. As noted earlier, much of the research in advertising is administrative in nature--focusing on issues of strategy or method. What critical research that does exist has more often been intent on popularization than serious analysis and critique.[13] Nevertheless, those works which have seriously studied institutions of advertising and messages of advertising, have usually challenged the thinking of advertisers and the public.

Among those few studies of advertising as an institution, the work of David Potter, although several years old, is perhaps the most notable. In reviewing the historical and economic development of advertising as an institution, Potter came to the conclusion that advertising was one of a limited group of social institutions which he labelled "instruments of social control." "These institutions," he wrote:

> guide the life of the individual by conceiving of him in a distinctive way and encouraging him to conform as far as possible to the concept. . . . Advertising appeals primarily to the desires, the wants--cultivated or natural--of the individual and it sometimes offers as its goal a power to command the envy of others by outstripping them in the consumption of goods and services.[14]

Like other works in the critical tradition, Potter embodied in his analysis the "theory of the prevailing social trends of the times" which Lazarsfeld found to be a key characteristic of critical research.

While more recent studies of advertising institutions have been presented, they have usually been within the framework of a larger study of culture and society. A notable exception is Stuart Ewen's study of the early years of advertising in which advertising is presented as an instrument of social control, a theme of Potter's, but one not cited in the rather expansive bibliography of advertising commentary and research.[15]

Critical research has also addressed the message and symbol systems of advertising. Such studies have attempted to construct the "pecuniary philosophy" embodied in advertising, as Jules Henry did in Culture Against Man.[16] These studies have also attempted semiotic investigations of advertising, as illustrated by Varda Leymore's Hidden Myth and Judith Williamson's Decoding Advertisements.[17]

Most recently, Erving Goffman studied several hundred advertisements to explicate the prevailing social trends of our times with regards to gender relationships. His studies did not suggest the manipulative posture of advertising that the studies of Potter and Ewen suggested. Instead, Goffman envisioned advertisements as rituals. In commenting on the ritualistic nature of advertising, he wrote that:

> advertisers do not create the ritualized expressions they employ; they seem to draw upon the same corpus of displays, the same ritual idiom, that is the resource of all of us who participate in social situations, and to the same end: the rendering of glimpses of action readable. If anything, advertisers conventionalize our own conventions, stylize what is already a stylization, make frivolous use of what is already something considerably cut off from contextual controls. Their hype is "hyper-ritualization."[18]

In such a formulation, Goffman's work differs radically from much of the earlier work cited. Instead of adopting the manipulative model of much critical

research, Goffman argues that the advertisements simply re-present our social life. In so doing, he not only challenges some critical research, but also much of the administrative research which attempts to ascertain how one manipulates and shapes consumer attitudes and behaviors.[19]

Critical communication research, whether at the institutional level of Potter and Ewen or at the message or symbol system level of Henry, Leymore and Goffman, evaluates the role of mass communication in the lives of individuals and society with the objective of suggesting and developing, where necessary, fundamental changes in the understanding and use of mass communication.

Given the paucity of advertising research within a critical perspective, the purpose of the following will be to evaluate the role of advertising messages in the lives of individuals and society to contribute to this small, but growing body of critical advertising literature.

II. Methods of Critical Analysis

In writing on critical communication research in the early 1940's, Lazarsfeld argued that "the main task of research is to uncover the unintentional (for the most part) and often subtle ways in which the media contribute to living habits and social attitudes." The manner or method in which this is uncovered, Lazarsfeld noted, "is not easy."[20]

The methods used in critical analysis vary widely. The work of Goffman, for instance, utilized "frame analysis" to suggest the nature of gender relationships embodied in print advertising. The other studies of advertising messages, specifically those of Leymore and Williamson, analyzed print advertisements in terms of signifiers, signifieds and signs of meaning--semiotics. And the work on advertising as an institution, those studies of Potter and Ewen, relied on historical analysis to evaluate advertising.[21]

One of the original methods of critical analysis is theme analysis, specifically explicating the overt and covert themes of mass communication messages. In one of the first studies to use this method, "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture," Theodore Adorno characterized the intentions of thematic analysis and critical inquiry when he stated that "we are not concerned with the effectiveness of any particular program or show, we are concerned with the nature of present day television and its imagery." Going further, Adorno contended that it is in the study of this imagery that one discovers "the prevailing ideology of our time."[22]

In articulating the ideology of the time, theme analysis argues that mass communication messages consist of several layers of meaning which contribute to the overall meaning of the message. While sensitive to different levels of meaning, Adorno argued that most mass communication messages have two major levels of meaning--overt and hidden (or covert).[23]

The overt theme or level of meaning is the readily familiar and obvious "message" of mass communication. This theme or motif can be the obvious sales appeal of an advertisement, "the consumption of a soft drink brings happiness," or the motif of an entertainment program, "rural life (ala The Waltons) is harmonious and wonderful."

The covert theme in the mass communication message is not subliminal nor unconscious, as some would argue, but is merely unobtrusive in terms of the total message. Quite frequently the covert meaning or theme is the background against which the overt theme is placed. The covert theme could be the cancerous nature of cigarettes, inspite of the overt suggestion that they provide a taste of the country, or the urban quality of modern life, contrary to the suburban quality of Eight Is Enough.

In hypothesizing multiple level themes in mass communication messages, Adorno

argued that such messages "enthrall the spectator on various psychological levels simultaneously." Such a psychological involvement allows, Adorno claimed, for a less than consistent set of themes or motifs.[24] In fact, such mass communication messages may embody contradictory overt and covert themes. Whether that is in fact the case depends to a large extent on the prevailing ideology of the time which finds its articulation in mass communication messages.

In his study, Adorno found that the overt and covert themes of television programming were diametrically opposed. The overt themes of such programming, Adorno argued, represented the imagery of an earlier middle-class society, while the covert themes portrayed a more confused and contradictory world, one which corresponded rather closely to that lived in by the present middle-class. The success of the analyzed programming and the acceptance of such disparate themes was the result of the fact, Adorno claimed, that "the more opaque and complicated modern life becomes, the more people are tempted to cling desperately to cliches which seem to bring some order into the otherwise ununderstandable."[25]

A more recent study of overt and covert themes in television programming, "Prime Time Television and Emerging Rhetorical Visions" by William Brown, differs with Adorno's and suggests that current television programming provides inconsistent visions of modern life which cannot be used for successful social organization and action. As such, according to Brown, they are unsatisfactory rhetorical visions in that they do not provide "an internally consistent symbolic reality that confers integration upon the felt-quality of American life."[26]

It is worth noting that theme analysis, such as that of Adorno and Brown, does not dictate a preordained interpretation and understanding of mass communication messages. As shown above, Adorno suggested that television programming provided a cliche ideology for living, while Brown argued that television

programming provided no systematic ideology for living, cliche or otherwise.

In the analyses of Brown and Adorno, the suggestion is that overt and covert themes, and the resulting world view, characterize the symbolic television environment. In point of fact, these themes portray the motifs of the television programming environment, ignoring or subsuming the themes of television advertising. The assumption implied in such studies is that television advertising is not worth consideration. This may be due to the belief that television advertising is thematically similar to television programming. However, more realistically, this lack of consideration is probably the result of scholars feeling that television advertising is a qualitatively inferior cultural expression which is not worth consideration. Either attitude goes against current thinking and writing. As Bob Shanks has recently contended, television advertising is intricately related to television programming. Specifically, television programming is usually constructed in a "bland" fashion so as not to seriously engage the viewers, but rather to allow television advertising to more deeply affect and engage the receivers.[27] Consequently, Shanks concurs with Boorstin, Phelan and others that advertising provides the truest representation of the ideology of our times.[28] As a result, advertisments may be more appropriately understood as the quintessential mass communication message for critical research with theme analysis a proper means for such research to ascertain the prevailing ideology of these times.

III. Thematic Analysis: Data and Procedures

The television advertisements for this overt and covert theme analysis came from one week's worth of prime time television. Using a sampling procedure, the author randomly selected half-hour segments from the three commercial television networks during one of the television industry's sweep weeks. In choosing a

sweep period, the author assumed that the television industry, intent on attracting the largest audience possible, would present some of the best programming and that the advertising industry, intent on making the most impact, would offer its best advertisements during this period.

After editing the videotapes to eliminate all programming, promotions and local advertising, the national advertisements were analyzed for overt and covert themes, using the definitions of Adorno and Brown to clarify the nature of each theme. The author chose to eliminate local advertising in the belief that local advertisements do not have an impact on the national prime time audience.

The resulting themes were then organized in terms of the major overt and covert themes present in television advertising. Here, the concern was with the "relative significance" of the various themes to the larger world view presented, not with the statistical frequency with which particular themes occurred.[29] The following discussion is of the type Gerbner has defined as "consequence meaning-oriented" where the emphasis is on the value of the particular meaning to the overall research program or inquiry.[30]

IV. Theme Analysis

Much of the commentary which passes for serious criticism or support of advertising, selects particular aspects of advertising--a blatantly sexist commercial here or a particularly creative commercial there--and argues either for or against advertising's influence on public opinion and behavior. The purpose of the following analysis and discussion is to avoid such selective commentary. Instead, the author will analyze in a holistic fashion the overt and covert themes which pervade the commercial television advertising environment. Toward that end, the following will detail the overt themes which are manifest in television advertising and then present the covert themes which

underlie these overt motifs.

Overt Themes

The fundamental overt theme in the prime time television advertising environment is the need and importance for self-satisfaction and self-glorification. While evidenced in most advertising, this theme is most apparent in the beauty and cosmetic commercials which make up a large part of the television advertising environment. Consider, as a first example, the following dialogue from a commercial in which a man and a woman, against a neutral backdrop, carry on the following discussion:

WOMAN: When I started to go gray, it made me feel old and grumpy.

MAN: Yes, I remember that.

WOMAN: I didn't know about Loving Care then. Now I just wash away my gray and wash in my own natural color. Loving Care is really different. And it is gentle because Loving Care has no peroxides. Me gray? No way! I'm too young to look old.

MAN: But you still get a little grumpy.

ANNCR: Loving Care. Only from Clairol. Because you're too young to look old.[31]

Like other cosmetic product advertisements, this commercial emphasizes the importance of individual satisfaction and well-being. The woman's contention that gray hair makes her "feel old and grumpy" and her later declaration that "I'm too young to look old" evidence a concern for individual satisfaction on a physical and emotional level. The actual structure of the commercial further encouarges this overt theme. The woman talks of her dilemma without acknowledging or addressing the man. The realization of satisfaction and well-being are defined in terms of the individual's effort and choice. Outside parties are not important

to self-satisfaction and self-realization.

In other commercials this theme is refined and enlarged. One variation of the basic theme of individual choice resulting in self-satisfaction is a theme suggesting that individual initiative produces self-improvement and advancement. Set to music, the following jingle for a soft drink commercial is sung over a series of visual images of joggers and runners and makes this thematic point:

CHORUS: Marathon and cross country, everybody is on the run.
Not so much just to stay in shape, but because it's lots of fun.
And the light refreshing taste today is what we're looking for.
That is why Seven-Up is turning up now more and more.
Reaching Up! Warming Up!
Looking Up! Running Up!
America is turning Seven-Up.
Moving Up! Jogging Up!
Feeling Up! Being Up!
America is turning Seven-Up.

The logic of the overt theme in this commercial is that individual effort--athletic endeavors--produces or equals self-satisfaction and self-improvement. The basic theme is present in such lines as "everybody is on the run./Not so much just to stay in shape, but because it's lots of fun." And the present variation is manifest in the closing refrains where individual effort is correlated with self-improvement. Amidst images of joggers and athletic actions, "jogging up," and "running up," the commercial mixes lyrics of self-improvement, "looking up," "feeling up," "moving up," and "being up."

In still other commercials, the overt theme is broadened to suggest that individual effort, productivity and choice are interrelated and collectively they

define the essence of the individual. In cosmetic commercials, for example, a consistent theme is that individuals can create and, consequently, change their appearance and self. The first commercial suggested that "I just wash away my gray and wash in my own natural color." Another example in this self-expression and definition motif introduces a new activity--face writing. In this commercial, the woman speaks directly to the viewer, while the camera cuts to close-ups of the cosmetic's application. She tells the viewer that:

> WOMAN: Face writing is here from Maybelline. It's lip writing. It's cheek writing. And it's easy with new lip and cheek styler pencils. Write lips with lipstick in a pencil. Lots of luscious long wearing colors. Write a cheek with creamy soft, blendable colors. Write a face as unique as your signature. Get styler pencils for lips, cheeks and eyes. Face writing is here from Maybelline.

The advertisement overtly equates self-expression--"write lips," "write a cheek"--with self-definition--"write a face as unique as your signature."

The overt theme of accomplishment, productivity and individuality is also present in the numerous commercial messages for photographic equipment. From the "Can Do" cameras to the various 35mm cameras, individual creativity and accomplishment are the significant overt themes in these advertisements. Consider the following advertisement in which a man is photographing an ice skater. The advertisement visually presents the man watching the skater through the camera viewfinder and then, at the end of the commercial, the woman photographing the man. The dialogue is as follows:

> MAN: Photographing Peggy Fleming was like watching a bird in flight. It was a perfect assignment for my Canon AF1. Unlike most cameras, even on automatic, I get the shutter

speed I need to stop the action. So it is like Peggy's in the clouds and I am with her and the shots just happen. Here, you try it Peggy.

WOMAN: Me?

MAN: It's really so simple. All you do is focus and click.

ANNCR: The incomparable Canon AF1. So advanced, it's simple.

As in the previous commercial, the overt theme is individual creativity and productivity. The photographer contends that "I get the shutter speed I need to stop the action. So it is like Peggy's in the clouds and I am with her." In this overt motif, photography becomes a creative, participatory and individually controlled activity.

In general, the overt theme manifested in these and other television advertisements is that self-initiative and effort result in self-satisfaction, improvement and accomplishment. The overall world view which emerges from such an overt theme is that of an active and productive lifestyle in which individuals are independent, self-reliant and self-confident.

Covert Themes

The covert themes present in television advertising contrast, if not negate, the overt motifs and world view discussed above. Although the overt themes promote self-satisfaction and self-glorification, the fundamental covert theme suggests external determination of individual well-being and essence. As a case example, the first noted commercial for hair coloring stated that gray hair makes one feel old and grumpy. And in the advertisement's resolution, the implication is that "natural" colored hair, an external factor, makes one feel young and alive.

This basic covert motif extends beyond matters of appearance. In many commercials, the product determines individual well-being. Consider the following in

which a man is depicted showering and dressing for work, while over these images the following is presented:

CHORUS: It's a new Dial morning and you're up and feeling new.
It's a clean Dial morning and that clean belongs to you.
There's a new day dawning and your bath is showing through.
Starting out clean, starting out Dial, starting out new.

ANNCR: There is no cleaner way to start a new day than Dial soap. The deodorant protection that gets you so clean you feel your best.

CHORUS: Starting out clean, starting out Dial, starting out new.

Like the photography commercial in which the proper camera gave the individual particular attributes, this advertisement conforms to the basic covert motif and suggests that using the particular toiletry will make one feel better and start out new.

Within this covert motif of external determination and control of individual well-being, television advertising promotes specific social criteria or standards for living. These standards can address a multitude of areas and issues. The importance of being young (or looking young) is evident in much of the beauty and cosmetic advertising. Another area, covered in the previous commercial, is cleanliness and its significance. The Dial advertisement stresses the need to start out clean each morning by washing with deodorant soap. Rather ironically, however, other commercials provide different meanings for cleanliness. In the following commercial, a woman and an announcer and then her husband discuss laundry. The conversations goes as follows:

ANNCR: Does your husband care about wash?

WOMAN: No, he doesn't care.

ANNCR: Mrs. Diaz uses just detergent alone. Let's see what happens

when she adds Clorox bleach to one of her loads.

(To Mr. Diaz) Which pair of socks would you rather wear?

MAN: These. They just look cleaner. Who wants to walk around in dull socks.

WOMAN: Yes I would rather see you in these socks also. He picked the socks washed in Clorox. I didn't think Clorox would make a difference, but apparently it does. Clorox makes the difference. I believe he cares.

This commercial covertly not only reinforces the theme of external determining internal, but also establishes the qualities of cleanliness--whiter and brighter are cleaner.

The prime time television environment abounds in such covertly established criteria and standards. One of the more significant in its implications to the larger themes and motifs is the need for child satisfaction, often through parental acquiescence to a child's wants or demands. In one commercial which deals with this theme, a woman, against a backdrop of playground equipment and kids with lunch boxes, makes the following presentation:

WOMAN: No Jimmy. That's your sandwich.

(To Viewer) If their mothers only knew. As their day camp counselor, I see kids don't always eat what you pack for lunch. I know mine do, now that I pack their favorite sandwiches on their favorite bread--Wonder. There are cheaper breads, but they are not always this fresh and soft, the way kids like bread. When you send lunch, send Wonder. Soft, fresh Wonder. Kids eat it up.

In line with the general world view of the individual being satisfied by and attentive to external factors and forces, the adult presented accepts a

child's like or dislike as the major factor in selecting the product. Considerations of nutrition or cost are either ignored or discounted. A further implication of the covert motif in this commercial is the positive nature of youth. In harmony with the cosmetic commercials expousing youth as a time of life and pleasure, this advertisement reinforces this standard with the "please the youth" theme.

Another variation of the basic covert motif of acceptance and gratification by external sources is the encouragement of continued use or dependence on the advertised productr or services. Such a theme has obvious marketing implications. More importantly for the television advertising environment, however, such a theme gives added significance to maintaining particular standards presented by television commercials. The beauty and cosmetic commercials illustrate this theme--wash every morning with Dial and wash in your own "natural" color everytime the gray begins to reappear. This variation of the general covert motif gains even more importance when put into a "new and improved" context which informs the consumer of the need to keep up--the standards have been raised and you need to keep up with this better quality of life.

The covert world view can be illustrated by the following commercial which not only suggests the variation of continued use, but also the need to be aware of the most current standards. In a laundry room, a grandmother, a mother and her daughter enact the following:

CHILD: Grandma make a mistake Mommy. She didn't buy Cling Free.

GRANDMA: I bought new and improved Cling Free, with springtime fresh fragrance. And Cling Free has thousands of softness cells with special softners to make your whole laundry soft. No static cling and everything smells springtime clean. And Cling Free is more convenient than the white

sheets. From the box into the dryer.

ANNCR: Get Cling Free with new springtime freshness. It's softness made simple.

Not only does this commercial suggest the continued use and the general motif of outside agents affecting internal actions, but the advertisement also adds new qualities to the general standard of cleanliness mentioned above. Here, cleanliness is defined as soft, free of static, and smelling springtime clean. In each of these characteristics, a quality not directly related to cleanliness becomes associated with the general concept of cleanliness. The success of such an equation is dependent upon the more general motif of external determining the inner nature of something or someone. One is not young unless one's hair is a "natural" color. And one's clothing is not clean unless it is whiter, brighter, soft, free of static and smelling springtime clean.

This commercial also embodies a third variation of the covert motif of acceptance and acquiescence. Here, the given order of society, the status quo, is accepted and glorified. In the advertisement, the presence of static cling is accepted as part of modern life. The origins of the static cling, man-made drying which replaced fresh air drying, are never questioned or considered. Rather, the man-made problem (static cling) is solved with a man-made solution (the product) and, in the process, a lost attribute of fresh air drying (the smell) is also given a man-made solution and replacement, a chemically produced "springtime smell."

This third variation, the acceptance of man-made problems, or at least the coping with the problems by devising various solutions to diminish those problems, is evident in much of the pain remedy advertising. Consider the following in which several individuals are interviewed by an off-screen announcer:

ANNCR: When you've got a headache, what does extra-strength

mean to you?

WOMAN: (Standing in busy metropolitan area) It means a crummy headache won't ruin your day. It means Excedrin.

WOMAN#2: (Pointing to fighting children in background) Extra-strength means relief from this. It means Excedrin.

MAN: (On construction site) Extra-strength means not feeling the pain anymore. Extra-strength means Excedrin.

The covert world view of this commercial embodies all three of the variations discussed thus far. In terms of the first variation, the establishment of standards or criteria, the advertisement suggests that freedom from pain is achievable without altering the situation that may have encouraged or caused the pain. As for the second variation, which encourages repeated use and consumption, the advertisement suggests product use when one is on the town, at home or at work so as to not "ruin your day." The third variation, the acceptance of the status quo, is presented in the toleration of the hectic pace of the metropolitan area, the turbulent nature of family and home life (here the supremacy of the child is again reinforced), and the stresses and strains from working.

This covert world view is also presented in the commercials for home protection and robbery insurance which accept the hazard and prescribe the remedy. This same theme is also evident in the various communication-related advertisements on television. Against a visual montage of two families and their activities, including a phone conversation, the following is presented:

CHORUS: Your friends, they live so far from you and keeping them close is so easy to do.

Reach out, reach out and touch someone.

Reach out, reach out and just say hi.

Reach out, reach out and touch someone.

ANNCR: Don't let those new friends get away. A telephone call now and then will bring them closer. They're waiting to hear from you. So reach out and touch someone. Give them a call!

In this commercial, the overt theme of active participation and touching is counterpointed by a covert motif of individual separation and fragmentation, and its acceptance. No longer can one maintain friends and neighbors in the manner of earlier times, the commercial covertly suggests. The busy movement and mobility of modern life makes it important for one to adapt and cope with the present state of affairs. Overtly one is encouraged to seek individual satisfaction, while covertly the commercial suggests accepting the status quo and ignoring the larger social issues which contribute to this fragmentation.

A final example of this variation of the covert world view is presented in a beauty and cosmetic commercial in which a woman, against a neutral backdrop, makes the following presentation:

WOMAN: Like your hands, your hair gets chapped too. If your hair is rough, dried out, cracked--that's chapped hair and you need the conditioner for chapped hair. Breck's secret formula penetrates into each chapped hair, treats the damage and protects the hair with no oily feel. For healthy, vibrant hair with body by the handful.

Not only does this advertisement covertly suggest that particular problems can be solved by existing institutions and companies, but it also obscures the cause of the particular problem and blurs the logic of the acceptable alternatives. Here, a "secret formula" to recreate the natural, healthy, vibrant hair is suggested. An earlier hair coloring commercial posited that one could wash in one's "natural" hair color. In each case, natural comes from a bottle

and one is given a covert motif of acceptance of the given order and is presented with other themes which legitimize this world view.

A final theme present in the covert world view of television advertising is that of a fragmented world in which each element is separate and isolated from other elements. Such a theme is presented in physical and symbolic terms.

Physically, the television environment is composed of a set of discrete units or "spots." The viewer is presented with a commercial for one product, then another product, then a service, then another product, etc. In the prime time television environment, the order of arrangement of particular commercials before or after other advertisements is arbitrarily determined. The resulting logic regarding television advertising is fragmentation. Each commercial can be presented in any time spot, between any two commercials, and the meaning does not change.

Symbolically, the theme of fragmentation is given even stronger presentation. Each advertisement, as thus far shown, takes a very narrow approach to a particular problem and suggests a solution within very narrow parameters. By way of example, the earlier advertisement for hair coloring suggested that simply washing in one's natural hair color would result in a youthful individual. This narrow approach ignores the importance and interrelationships of other aspects of youthful appearance--age, posture, dress, skin tone and color, and overall appearance. In fact, one can locate within the prime time television environment a variety of advertisements which suggest that by simply changing one's dress or moisturizing one's skin one can become young.

In both physical and symbolic terms, the covert theme of fragmentation presents the individual, as well as society, as an assemblage of parts, each of which can be improved or changed without relating to other parts nor changing the overall structure.

In general terms, the major findings of this analysis of the prime time television advertising environment suggest contradictory themes and motifs. Overtly, these television advertisements encourage a world view of individual determination, initiative, self-confidence and self-reliance. The covert themes, in contrast, present a world view of external determination in which standards are established, consumption is encouraged, the status quo is accepted, and fragmentation is characteristic of modern life.

V. Interpretations

In discussing the presence of divergent overt and covert themes in television programming several years ago, Adorno suggested that this gap represented a thematic split in the national consciousness. Specifically, he wrote that:

> the curse of modern culture seems to be its adherence to the almost unchanged ideology of earlier middle-class society, whereas the lives of its consumers are completely out of phase with this ideology. This is the probable reason for the gap between the overt and the "hidden" messages of modern popular art.[32]

Extending Adorno's thinking to the findings of the present study, one interpretation for the divergent themes or motifs in television advertising is that the overt theme of individual initiative and effort producing self-improvement and self-satisfaction (a variation on the free enterprise theme) is a cliche ideology, out of phase with the lived ideology. Further, the covert theme which suggests dependence on the existing commercial enterprise is the lived ideology of these times. In a simple formulation, Adorno's thinking would suggest a political interpretation--the individual living in modern capitalistic society clings to the ideology of free enterprise and initiative, although the individual is realistically wedded to an ongoing system which cannot be changed, but merely

accepted.

Adorno's ideas represent but one interpretation of these themes. There are other interpretations which can broaden out understanding of how these overt and covert themes can coexist and also of the nature of the ideology of our times that goes beyond the political and economic notions of the Frankfurt School.

A second interpretation is to take both the overt and covert themes as attempts to persuade. Then, within such general boundaries, one can follow the thinking of Jacques Ellul and suggest that the overt themes represent what Ellul calls "propaganda of agitation," while the covert themes represent "propaganda of integration."[33]

In Ellul's formulation, propaganda of agitation takes the individual "out of his everyday life, his normal framework, and plunges him into enthusiasm and adventure; it opens to him hitherto unsuspected possibilities, and suggests extra-ordinary goals that nevertheless seem to him completely within reach."[34]

Propaganda of integration, in contrast, according to Ellul, "aims at making the individual participate in his society in every way." Such propaganda "seeks to obtain stable behavior, to adapt the individual to his everyday life, to reshape his thoughts and behavior in terms of the permanent social setting."[35]

Within these terms, the television advertising environment presents on an overt level a theme of change and "go for all the gusto" which fits nicely within the idea of propaganda of agitation. Covertly, the television advertising environment presents propaganda of integration which suggests accepting the status quo and the established standards of behavior.

The problem with such an interpretation is that Ellul's theoretical structure does not explicitly deal with the notions of overt and covert themes. Further, Ellul denies the existence of propaganda of agitation and propaganda of integration in the same society at the same time, much less in the same message. He

outlines very specific characteristics for the successful use of each type of propaganda. It is obviously beyond the scope of this paper to take Ellul's ideas and thoroughly explore the possibility of such a theoretical formulation for overt and covert themes, much less argue for the coexistence of these two types of propaganda.

A third, alternative interpretation of the reported overt and covert themes is based on the most recent work of Clifford Geertz and addresses some of the same points discussed in the work of Goffman. Namely, this interpretation suggests the some aspects of advertising may be understood as ritual, not as persuasion. In a recent article, "Blurred Genres," Geertz offers a review of the different methods used to study societies. Among those methods, Geertz gives particular attention to two seemingly divergent approaches to the study of social life. One approach, typified by the work of Kenneth Burke, but also including the work of Adorno and Ellul, deals with the expressive nature of communication. Within this orientation, the emphasis is on the manifest meaning of social action and how one actor's message persuades or affects another actor's thoughts or actions.[36] A second approach, exemplified by the work of Victor Turner and others, addresses the experiential nature of communication. Here, the focus is on the ritual meaning in social action and how communication messages integrate and solidify social life, not how they agitate or persuade.[37]

In the ongoing study of social life, these two approaches, Geertz notes:

> pull in rather opposite directions: the ritual theory towards the affinities of theater and religion--drama as communion, the temple as stage; the symbolic action theory toward those of theater and rhetoric--drama as persuasion, the platform as stage.[38]

This quote should not suggest, however, that the two approaches are mutually

exclusive. Rather, as Geertz argues, these approaches address different aspects of social life which mean "rather different things, and thus have rather different implications for social life."[39] In his recent study, Negara, Geertz demonstrates how Balinese culture in the 19th century relied on both types of social action--symbolic action and ritual action--to sustain the political structure of the society.[40]

In general terms, Geertz argues in Negara that social life needs both symbolic action and ceremonial action for continued existence. As Quentin Skinner recently argued, the significance of such a contention is that much of Western culture relies too much on a view of social life as symbolic action and, more importantly, power as persuasion and manipulation. A failure to acknowledge and appreciate the ritualistic aspects of social life, according to Skinner, "may now be serving to inhibit rather than clarify our understanding not merely of alien cultures, but also of ourselves."[41]

Such an obfuscation, it is here suggested, can be found in critical studies of advertising. Amidst many of the works on advertising, the overriding assumption is that all aspects of advertising are persuasive, or at least intent on persuasion. From the more scholarly works of Ewen and Williamson to the more sensational books by Key, the theme is that we are being manipulated. This general perspective is also evident in the work of Adorno and Ellul. The original overt and covert theme analysis of Adorno suggested capitalistic persuasion, while Ellul's propaganda of agitation and integration suggested a more general view of manipulation.

Clarifying our understanding, Geertz is suggesting, involves accommodating both symbolic action and ritual interpretations. In critical communication studies, the work of Goffman which stresses the "hyper-ritualization" of advertising provides but one exegesis which suggests that the importance and

and significance of advertising to understanding the ideology of our times goes beyond simple manipulation. Accordingly, the findings from the present study can also be intepreted within the guidelines suggested by Geertz.

Specifically, the prime time television advertisement uses both rhetorical and ritualistic modes of communication, much like Balinese culture. In television advertising, the overt themes of individual action and choice--the sales message--are themes of symbolic action. Copywriters formulate their appeals and arguments on this level and in this vein with the explicit intention of persuading the individual that particular goals can be reached and particular lifestyles lived.

Within the prime time television commercial, the covert motif--the maintenance of the status quo--is of a ritualistic mode of communication. In those variations on this motif, each works toward the communion of minds which is realized in ritual communication.

While potentially able to contradict and negate each other, the themes of prime time television advertising actually work to reinforce and complement each other, much like symbolic action and ritual worked to maintain 19th century Balinese culture as described in Geertz's Negara. In television advertising, the covert, ritualistic theme of the status quo becomes the backdrop of the familiar and accepted of social life. The lived reality of the culture, through such a ritualized world view, is legitimized.

Against this background, the overt, symbolic action theme of individuality becomes the figure in the figure-ground relationship of the television advertisement's thematic structure. The result is a highly dynamic arrangement which provides a provocative, yet familiar communication message.

The significance of television advertising, then, is not in the foisting of products or services on the public. Rather, it is in the mini-dramas in which

overt themes of symbolic action are enacted against a background of the familiar and stable.

In conclusion, television advertising is too often cast as the hidden persuader of our culture by people who otherwise advocate an interactive approach to communication and culture. The present paper seeks to suggest that television advertising can also be considered and understood in a more humanistic manner by addressing both persuasive and ritualistic dimensions of the advertising message. The consequence is in not viewing television advertising as seduction or exploitation, but as culture writ electronic.

Footnotes

[1]Samuel Johnson, Idler, 1759

[2]Brian Wilson Key, The Clam Plate Orgy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980); John Wright (ed.), The Commercial Connection (New York: Delta, 1979).

[3]Ronald Matlon and Irene Matlon (eds.), The Index to Journals in Communication Through 1974 (Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1975).

[4]Charles Ramond, Advertising Research (New York: Association of National Advertisers, 1976); and Thomas Gordon and Mary Ellen Verna (eds.), The Effects of Mass Communication (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1979).

[5]Fred W. Morgan, Jr., "The Products Liability Consequences of Advertising," Journal of Advertising, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1979), pp. 30-37.

[6]Thomas E. Barry, "A Framework for Ascertaining Deception in Children's Advertising," Journal of Advertising, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1980), pp. 11-18.

[7]Christine D. Urban, "Editorial and Program Choices of Heavy Media Users," Journal of Advertising, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1980), pp. 32-43.

[8]Paul Lazarsfeld, "Administrative and Critical Communications Research," Studies in Philosophy and Social Science, Vol. 9 (1941), pp. 2-16; and Michael Real,"Media Theory," American Quarterly, Vol. 8 (1980), pp. 238-258.

[9]Ibid., p. 8.

[10]Ibid., p. 10.

[11]See James Curran, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Woollacott (eds.), Mass Communication and Society (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1979), pp. 1-5.

[12]Lazarsfeld, p. 14.

[13]See the various works of Key and Carl P. Wrighter, I Can Sell You Anything (New York: Random House, 1972).

[14]David Potter, People of Plenty (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1954), p. 176.

[15]Stuart Ewen, Captains of Consciousness (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

[16]Jules Henry, Culture Against Man (New York: Random House, 1963), pp. 45-99.

[17]Varda Langholz Leymore, Hidden Myth (New York: Basic Books, 1975); and Judith Williamson, Decoding Advertisements (London: Marion Boyars, 1978).

[18]Erving Goffman, "Gender Advertisements," Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1976), p. 154.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Lazarsfeld, p. 9.

[21]See Leymore; Williamson; Potter; and Ewen.

[22]T. W. Adorno, "Television and Patterns of Mass Culture," Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television, Vol. 8 (1954). Reprinted in Wilbur Schramm (ed.), Mass Communications (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), pp. 594-612. Quoted material, p. 597.

[23]Ibid., p. 601.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid., p. 608.

[26]William Brown, "Prime Time Television and Emerging Rhetorical Visions," Quarterly Journal of Speech, Vol. 62, No. 4 (1977), p. 395.

[27]Bob Shanks, The Cool Fire (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 98.

[28]Ibid.; Daniel J. Boorstin, Democracy and Its Discontents (New York: Random House, 1974); and John Phelan, Mediaworld (New York: Seabury, 1977).

[29]Leo Lowenthal, Literature and the Image of Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953).

[30]George Gerbner, "On Content Analysis and Critical Research in Mass Communication," A V Communications Review, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1958), pp. 85-108.

[31]All commercial citations are taken from transcripts of the videotaped commercials used in the study.

[32]Adorno, p. 599.

[33]Jacques Ellul, Propaganda (New York: Random House, 1965), pp. 70-79.

[34]Ibid., p. 72.

[35]Ibid., p. 75.

[36]Clifford Geertz, The American Scholar, Vol. 49 (1980), pp. 172-173.

[37]Ibid., pp. 173-174.

[38]Ibid., p. 172.

[39]Ibid., p. 173.

[40]Clifford Geertz, Negara (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[41]Quentin Skinner, "The World as a Stage," New York Review of Books, Vol. 28, No. 6 (April 16, 1981), p. 37.